

VZCZCXRO2529
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #1848/01 1701624
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 181624Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7867
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC//NSC//

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 001848

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/17/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: WAY AHEAD ON ASSISTANCE TO RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

REF: A. BAGHDAD 1705 B. BAGHDAD 1111 C. BAGHDAD 1017 D. BAGHDAD 663 E. BAGHDAD 284 F. BAGHDAD 1552 G. 07 BAGHDAD 2782 H. BAGHDAD 1575 I. BAGHDAD

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Patricia A. Butenis for reasons
1.4(b) and (d)

Summary

11. (S) Post is actively engaged in efforts to address the plight of vulnerable religious minority populations in Iraq, in particular in the areas of jobs and security. The USG already provides significant assistance to regions of Iraq with large religious minority populations, particularly in the north. USAID and PRT funds support programs in governance, health, education, civil society, water, income generation, and more; and have rehabilitated schools, trained officials, and helped foster small businesses. We need to press the GOI and KRG to do more for religious minorities in terms of protecting them, ensuring they are not discriminated against in employment, education, or other ways, and providing support to their communities. We outline an action plan that includes: making this a priority issue to raise regularly with senior GOI and KRG officials and encourage them to take concrete steps to improve the situation for these communities, determining what kind of support religious minority communities themselves feel they need, increasing interaction with a wide range of contacts in Baghdad and elsewhere, and rapidly reviewing our existing assistance to determine what more we can do. We also provide some comments on the NSC's paper on "Protecting Religious Minorities in Iraq."

What We're Doing Now

12. (C) Post is focused on the situation of religious minorities in Iraq. At the Ambassador's request and under his direction we have set up a Minorities Working Group (ref I), which coordinates and directs our efforts to determine what's needed in order to promote security, stability, and economic prosperity for the minority communities, in both the immediate and long term; and what's necessary to create conditions in which they can remain, return, and flourish. In particular, we are reviewing what the USG and the GOI are already doing to help protect religious minorities, what more the U.S. and especially the GOI could be doing to help them, and trying to determine what the minorities themselves feel they need in order to feel secure and stay in Iraq. Over the past few weeks alone a number of senior USG officials have traveled up north to meet with Christian, Yezidi, and Shabak minority communities. Senior Advisor Ambassador Thomas Krajeski has been there twice in recent days, NEA/I Director Richard Schmierer just met with minorities in Ninewa province and the KRG, and Denise Herbol, acting USAID Director met with minority IDPs.

13. (C) Improving the economy and security are key to maintaining the religious minority communities in Iraq. Iraq reconstruction money, including USAID funds, are not used to provide assistance based on ethnicity or religious affiliation) the money goes where the need is greatest. However, USAID, for example, does much work in the northern provinces, where most of the religious minorities are located, and so their programs directly affect those populations. USAID and other USG funding in Ninewa province have rehabilitated schools and water treatment plants, trained provincial and local government officials, supplied vocational and business training and provided small business grants, just to name some of the projects.

14. (C) PRT Ninewa is implementing almost \$1 million in QRF funds for local projects in economic development, health, governance, and civil society, including a religious tolerance conference, many of which directly benefit the minority populations (ref B). The International Republican Institute (IRI) has trained minority Christian groups in development of civil society, public policy, and political parties as part of its overall programming. However, it has been clear from our conversations with minority leaders in the north that they do not want assistance focused solely on their communities, as they fear that could cause resentment from other communities and a concomitant increase in possible terrorist attacks. They are interested in programs that encourage community-wide involvement across sectarian and ethnic lines (ref A).

15. (C) The U.S. supports programs in governance, democracy, civil society, education, health, and more all over Iraq. All these programs contribute in a very basic way to the establishment of democracy and rule of law in Iraq. These programs affect the religious minorities directly and indirectly, as the growth of rule of law throughout the country benefits the minorities as the country as a whole becomes more stable, more secure, and safer for everyone, including the religious minorities. It also enables them to seek redress for their grievances as the judicial system and the local and national government become more responsive to citizens' needs and complaints.

16. (C) On security, we are closely following the progress of the hiring of more Christians into the Iraqi Police (IP) force in Ninewa. Of 700 recruited, 500 have been vetted and over half of those were judged qualified and will soon begin training, a higher than average acceptance percentage. Additionally, the IP in Ninewa have been authorized to hire approximately 9000 additional police from across all communities. We are trying to understand what steps the

minorities themselves want taken in order to improve security, as they are far from united on the issue (ref A). Integrating members of religious minorities into the Iraqi Security Forces is ultimately the best way to ensure their communities' safety.

The Way Ahead -----

17. (C) It is important to remember that while the religious minority communities are particularly vulnerable, all Iraqis are suffering from fear of sectarian violence, extremism, and lack of security. Thus, overall GOI efforts to reduce violence and improve security are vital to improving the situation of the minority communities. The efforts of PM Maliki and his government undertaken over the last two months in Basra, Mosul, and Sadr City in retaking areas under the sway of religious extremists will, in the long run, be the most significant factor in rebuilding a sense of security and safety amongst religious minorities in Iraq.

18. (C) Looking at the immediate future, there are a number of actions we should take. Most importantly we need to press the GOI and KRG to do more for religious minority populations in terms of protecting them, ensuring they are not discriminated against in employment, education, or other ways, and providing support to their communities. Specifically, we plan to proceed as follows:

-- Raise the issue of the precarious situation of Iraq's religious minorities with PM Maliki, President Talabani, the two Vice Presidents, and political bloc leaders. We will encourage the GOI to make more public statements like PM Maliki's strong statement in Mosul in May that stressed that Christians are an integral part of Iraq (ref H). As we determine what concrete assistance the minority communities need from the GOI, we'll press the GOI to take the necessary action. PM Maliki is planning a visit to Italy soon; we will encourage him to meet with the Pope, as that would send a strong signal of inclusiveness and tolerance, and would demonstrate that Iraq wants to maintain and protect its Christian communities, which together constitute the largest non-Muslim religious minority group in the country.

-- Get KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani and KRG President Massoud Barzani focused on the plight of the religious minorities, and provide them with concrete suggestions on ways they can help the communities. These include promoting better integration of minorities into the Iraqi police and army; making clear statements that discrimination against religious minorities is unacceptable and acknowledging them as an integral part of Iraq's multi-ethnic makeup; ensuring that harassment, land takeovers, and other such efforts cease; and ensuring that these directions filter down to the mid and working levels of the KRG and Peshmerga. We have already begun this: Rich Schmierer met with PM Nechirvan Barzani on June 12 and raised the problems religious minorities are facing; Nechirvan promised to explore ways to improve KRG assistance to minorities, and RRT Erbil will be following up on that (ref J). We will also keep this issue in front of other key KRG officials, such as Minister of Interior Sinjari.

-- Consult further with the religious minority communities to see what they feel they need from the KRG and the GOI (refs A, J).

-- Engage with a wide range of interlocutors in Baghdad to stress the urgency of the issue and coordinate efforts. These include the non-Muslim Endowment, the Papal Nuncio, human rights activists, CoR members (minority and other), GOI officials, and others who are or should be concerned about the issue.

-- We are rapidly reviewing our assistance programs and looking at new proposals that will benefit areas with large minority communities. In the immediate term, USAID and PRT Ninewa are trying to identify assistance projects that will benefit the religious minorities in the region, as well as the majority population, an approach that respects both our own USG guidelines and the stated preference of the religious minority leaders.

-- We're seeking further understanding of and information about the remaining Christian communities in the south (Basrah) and in Baghdad.

Comments On Options Presented in the NSC Paper -----

19. (S) We also want to provide some comments in response to the NSC paper "Protecting Religious Minorities in Iraq." Post has no evidence for the paper's statement that "effective NGO and humanitarian assistance efforts in the north have been hampered by poor security and Kurdish obstruction." USAID has not encountered obstacles in delivering its humanitarian and capacity-building assistance in the north, nor have NGOs such as IRI and NDI reported any problems in being able to work with minority communities in the region.

110. (S) While at least one town, Bartallah, has its own local Christian security force, supported by the Peshmerga (ref G), the major Christian groups in the north do not want to set up Sons of Iraq-type groups; and in fact, the economy, not security, seems to be the primary concern of Christian leaders there (refs D, J). The suggestion that the Peshmerga forces be removed and replaced by army units with minority representation is, in the short and medium term, likely only to lead to greater insecurity for the minority populations. The Peshmerga provide the most effective security for those populations right now, despite some anecdotal reports of harassment, and should not be removed until adequately trained Iraqi police or army forces can take their place. Any transition must be careful and gradual.

111. (S) The suggestion of immediately deploying U.S. civilian and military support teams to protect areas with large religious minority populations again runs into the question of raising the profile of these communities in a way that they don't want, and generating resentment towards them that could result in terrorist attacks, as several Christian interlocutors have said they fear. Integrating religious minorities into the local Iraqi police and army is a much better way to go. The recruitment of Christians into the

Iraqi police (as discussed earlier) and army is a good start, and Post and PRT Ninewa are following up with local and national officials on next steps.

¶12. (S) Encouraging formation of a "Federal Unit" in the Ninewa region is a bad idea. We have studiously avoided taking a position on region formation or the establishment of autonomous areas, since a) it's an Iraqi decision; and b) there are regions (such as "Shia-stan" in the south) that we would probably rather not see. Encouraging such a region or autonomous area in the north would also inevitably have repercussions for the sensitive Article 140 discussions currently being led by UNAMI. Cardinal Delli, head of the Chaldean Church, told us that establishment of such a region or autonomous area would probably result in pressure being put on Chaldeans living elsewhere to move to "their" region -- their neighbors would encourage them to leave. We would also not support formation of a university only for religious minorities. Iraq has a strong tradition of secular education, and as the security situation improves and extremist control of some universities weakens, that tradition should be maintained.

¶13. (S) Christian IDPs appear to be well taken care of when compared to other IDP groups (refs A, C), so there does not seem to be an immediate humanitarian crisis brewing with them (although they do experience economic and educational discrimination (ref J)). The suggestion that we press the local and national government to enable religious minority IDPs to receive their Public Distribution System (PDS) food in their area of displacement is a suggestion that should be applied equally to all IDPs, not just religious minorities, both for reasons of equality and for fear of creating resentment towards the minorities. Discouraging large-scale resettlement programs outside Iraq takes away a reasonable option for Iraqi minorities. While we don't want to encourage the exodus of minorities from Iraq, neither should we take away their right to choose that action, if they feel it is unsafe for them to stay. On the flip side, we should encourage return of religious minority -- and other -- refugees, but only when conditions warrant it and the refugees can return peacefully and safely to their homes. However, substantial anecdotal evidence indicates that the Christian refugee populations in neighboring countries, primarily Syria, are unlikely to want to return to Iraq under any conditions. Many have relatives abroad and are seeking to join communities already established in Europe and the United States. The exodus of Iraqi Christians to the west has been accelerated by recent social upheaval and violence, but several factors behind it predate the sectarian violence and are not unique to Iraq. We should not adopt returns of religious minority refugees as a measure of improving conditions for minorities as other factors are likely to weigh more heavily in their individual decisions.

BUTENIS